

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
April 14, 2024 – The Third Sunday of Easter
Luke 24:36b-48; The Resurrection of the Dead
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

For three weeks we have heard accounts of Jesus appearing to his closest friends and followers after the resurrection. Mary Magdalene grieving by the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid. A few of the disciples gathered in a room in fear and grief, first without Thomas and a week later when Thomas was present.

Today an account from Luke's Gospel when Jesus appeared to some of his disciples, and they thought they were seeing a ghost. Jesus went to great lengths to convince them that he was not a ghost. "Look at my hands and my feet" – in other words, "look at the wounds of my crucifixion and see that I am Jesus." "Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." The disciples needed more convincing, so Jesus said, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish and watched while Jesus ate. The disciples saw and touched a body of flesh and bones capable of eating food, and they heard a human voice. Not a ghost. A body, his body.

Christian faith is incarnational – intimately tied to bodies. Jesus was born in a human body, as we all are. Jesus grew up and matured physically and in every other way, as we do. Jesus walked and talked, ate and drank, got tired and slept. He touched others' bodies with his, to heal them. He provided food for people's bodies. He suffered the pain of crucifixion in his body. His body died, as ours will. And when God raised Jesus from the dead, he was recognizable as Jesus, with a body and a voice that remained human – his – though transformed.

We receive God's grace through our bodies when we eat the bread and drink the wine of the Eucharist. God works through us when we lay our hands on people's bodies and anoint them with oil as we pray for healing or bless them in God's name. Jesus taught that when we feed the hungry and clothe the naked, when we visit people who are sick or in prison, when we take these opportunities to serve others in their bodies through our bodies, we serve our Lord himself.

When we recite the Nicene Creed, we say that "we look for the resurrection of the dead." When we say the Apostles Creed – as we do when we renew our baptismal vows – we say that we believe in "the resurrection of the body." What does all this mean? What are we saying we believe?

Are we saying that we will be eating fish with Jesus in our resurrected bodies? We don't know. Someone in the church in Corinth asked St. Paul "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" and Paul called the questioner a "fool" (1 Corinthians 15:35-36). We know what our bodies are like now, but Paul did not think this provided us with knowledge about what our resurrected bodies will be like. As far as we can go is to say that we will be changed. Resurrected life is not just survival after death, a continuation of life as we know it.

No. We look in hope for much more, for salvation and for glorification, all by the gracious gift of God who gave us life in our mortal bodies.

The incarnation of God in Christ, the resurrection of Christ from the dead, Christ's appearances to his followers in a body recognizable as his own – all these events, central to the Christian faith, teach us the importance of our bodies. Christian faith is more than spiritual. It is about more than worship and prayer, important as they are. Christian faith is incarnational. Christian faith involves us in our totality – our souls and our bodies.

Jesus shows us what love looks like in this life of bodies. And he teaches us what to do, for the love of God, while we live in our bodies. The risen Lord who ate fish in front of his disciples to show them that he was not a ghost is the same Lord who taught us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick – in mercy to care for bodies.

Our hope for the resurrection of the dead and for the establishment by God of a new heaven and a new earth gives us a certain perspective on how to live now in the bodies we have. People without this perspective may think what we do is foolish. After all, if this is all the life we have, why share our resources with others? Why not just take care of ourselves and grab as much pleasure as we can get? Why take care of other non-human beings who share life on this planet? Why take care of the earth and sea and sky? Why not just exploit and use everyone and everything to get what we want for ourselves? Why indeed?

Our faith teaches us that to live that way is contrary to our true nature as people made in the image of God, with the capacity to love God and others deeply and faithfully, with the responsibility given to us by God to be good stewards of God's creatures and creation. Our faith teaches us that the very nature of God is love, an eternal dance of love among the three persons of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our faith teaches us that God created everything from nothing for love, from the beginning, and that in love God sustains creation. Our faith teaches us that God wants us to share in God's love, to live in love, for our true joy. Our faith teaches us that God will finally create a new heaven and a new earth, a new and eternal kingdom of love. If all that our faith teaches us about God is true, then we may enjoy a firm hope for eternal life with God in the resurrection of the body, by God's good and loving grace.

What does it mean when we say we believe in the resurrection of the dead, in the body's resurrection? It means that we hope for eternal life with God when we will be ourselves yet changed, the creatures of God as God meant us to be, full of love. It means that we look forward now in hope – in the words of St. Augustine – for “the eternal Lord's day, [when] we shall rest and we shall see, we shall see and we shall love, we shall love, and we shall praise, in the end that has no end.”

In God's most holy name. Amen.